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ABSTRACT

This investigation probes nursery school activities and children's interactions in relation to private and communal property. Analysis of 27 hours of taped interaction spread over 4 months of participant observation reveals that children attempt to gain access to private property in a different way than they try to obtain access to communal property. When children requested permission to use other children's private property, their requests were simply granted or denied. Attempts to gain access to communal (school) property often involved disputes. Rules governing private property refer to the owner's control of who, how, for how long and to what end the privately owned object can be used. Communal property was governed by a rule that it had to be shared. Children used private, but not communal, property to gain another's attention, to enter a conversation or change the topic and to influence other children. Formal, daily curriculum activities regularly included lengthy discussions of trespassing and stealing. Highly structured show-and-tell circle time activities focused undivided group attention on objects which children brought from home. Children did not show the same thing two weeks in a row, and school property and school made objects were not shown. It is suggested that cognitive categories and rules explain the observed patterns of interaction. (Author/RH)

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GIMME, IT'S MINE!:

CHILDREN'S CONCEPTS OF OWNERSHIP AS REVEALED IN INTERACTION

PAPER PREPARED FOR PRESENTATION AT THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION MEETING IN HOUSTON, TEXAS, NOVEMBER, 1977

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Americans are often described as, condemned for being fascinated, even obsessed with "things." I would argue that preschoolers are no different. They are fascinated by things, especially things people own themselves, their private property. Of the two kinds of property available in the nursery school, private and communal, it is private property which is most esteemed. It plays an important role in the everyday world of the nursery school. Entire sections of the formal and informal nursery school curriculum center around private property. Private property is a major topic of conversation as well as the basis for a number of important interactional strategies.

This paper is based on twenty seven hours of taped free flowing interactions recorded over a four month period of participant observation in a privately funded, integrated, middle class "unstructured" preschool in an Eastern city in the U.S.

The nursery school day is divided into free play periods and circle times, with breaks for snacks and lunch. During free play children are permitted to play in any one of several designated areas: the block, book, and household corners, as well as in the arts and crafts and dress up areas. Weather permitting they can also go outside. Otherwise, the center of the room is used for large motor activity and a rocking boat, house and gym are brought in. They may play alone or with others, with any objects the school makes available as well as with things that they brought from home.

Play is complex, involving securing of objects and often others to play with, deciding what to play and then sustaining the activity. In all of these tasks, property plays a key role. Natur-

ally the object desired is often in the hands of another. Getting another to part with what he was using was a rather frequent occurance in the nursery school. Examination of these interactions reveals that children went about gaining access to private property property differently from communal property.

When a child was interested in using another child's private property he simply asked the owners' permission. The request was either granted or denied. In either case that marked the end of the discussion of the issue. No further action was taken.

Sarah and Jill were coloring together.
Sarah: (Lifting a crayon) Can I write on this?
Jill: No.
Sarah: (Puts crayon down.)

Bre: (Approaches Myra and Amy. Amy is holding her doll) Can I hold the doll?
Amy: No. You can't 'til later.
Bre: Amy has a sore on her knee. She got it with me.

(Interaction continues)

Attempts to gain access to a piece of school property in the hands of another often led to disputes. In these disputes the children employed a number of strategies including: physically attacking the user (e.g. grabbing the object from the user or pushing him), shouting commands (e.g. 'Gimme that'), making assertions (e.g. 'I want that') and delivering threats (e.g. with a rising tone, "Gimme that now.") While these strategies were used alone, on many occasions they were used in combination. For example, as David grabbed a truck from Brian he yelled, "Gimme that, I want it." Quite commonly one of the aforementioned strategies would be combined with a "statement of the rules of the social order", also known in the literature as a "state-

ment of reasoned argument" or "moral persuasion" (Brennis and Lein 1977:52). For example, as Stevie pushed Dick off the bike he said, "You have to take turns." The type of simple request that opened an attempt to use anothers private property was not heard when access to school property was at issue.

Once the struggle was underway the child holding the property usually responded with a statement indicating that he was using it and had no intentions of giving it up, while at the same time tightening his grasp on the object. For example, as Jeffrey tried to get the pocketbook from Peter, Peter clutched it closer to his body and exclaimed, "No! No! That's my pocketbook and I'm using it."

Often these disputes went to third party arbitration. This occured when one of the children involved went to the teacher and tattled.

Melissa and David stepped into the house Lionel was playing in.

Lionel:	Get out. I'm here.
Melissa:	No.
Lionel:	It's mine, so get out of here.
David:	It's mine too.
Lionel:	I'm here so get out of here.
Melissa:	(All yelling at once.)
David:	
Lionel:	
Lionel:	(Runs to the Teacher) Somebody went in and got my home and I don't know how to get 'em out.
Teacher:	You don't know how to get 'em out.
Lionel:	What should I do? - punch 'em out.
Teacher:	No, you ask them to please get out.
Lionel:	(Goes back to the house) Move!
Teacher:	(Calls from across the room) Lionel, we have to share or I'll put it away.
Melissa:	
David:	(Each yelling, "No I want it.")
Lionel:	

Teacher: (Walking over) Well we have to share.
Lionel: I want to use it by myself.
Teacher: Well maybe you can explain that to David. Maybe you could pretend you have apartments and you each own an apartment.
Melissa, David, Lionel continued yelling until finally they all left the house.

Disputes over school property ended either in a draw or with one party gaining exclusive control over the object (see also examples on pp 5).

Recognizing now that the children went about gaining access to private property differently from the way they went about gaining access to communal property - how do we explain it? I would argue that the children's ability to distinguish private from communal property coupled with their understanding of the different rules which governed possession and use of each, accounts not only for the difference in the ways they attempted to gain access to each, but also for why attempts to gain access to communal property often led to disputes and why attempts to gain access to private property did not.

The children knew that the owner of a piece of private property had the sole right to determine how that property was to be used, by whom, for how long, and to what end.

Julie and David were playing with Sarah's Barbie dolls.
Kim: (Walks over) Can I try it?
Julie: No, uh, uh, 'cause no one can touch it.
David: Yeah, Sarah, said it.
Julie: You can't play with it, either, only us. 'Cause it's Sarah's.
Kim: So you can't play with my Barbie doll. (Walks on)[1]

No one, not even the teacher, forced anyone to share private possessions.

Teacher: Julie what did you bring?
Julie: (Holds up Wonder Woman coloring book)
Teacher: Maybe this afternoon you could share it with some of the children, let them color with you.
Julie: Some three children can color with me.
Teacher: O.K. Well do it this afternoon when there aren't so many children around. Thanks.

Therefore, when private property was at issue the children did no more than ask. If refused they acquiesced (see pp 2), realizing that they had no recourse.

Not so, with communal property. The children knew that communal property had to be shared, that they were required to "take turns", and guided their actions accordingly.

Amy and Bre were coloring together.
Amy: You better give me the red 'cause you don't just can't have it.
Bre: I just got it. Don't you now, you know. Don't you know, I just got it. Don't you know. I just got it. (Continues using the crayon. After a period of silence she hands it over to Amy).

Amy and Bre both wanted to use the same crayon at the same time. Bre was using it. Amy tried to get it from Bre by stating a rule of the order: one must take turns with school property - no one can use school property exclusively. Bre acknowledged that rule but also pointed out that the user had some right to continued access. Here in lies the problem and the source of continued discussion. When one's turn is up is open for discussion. "Taking turns", like "sharing",means that each person who wants to use a given piece of property must get a chance - how and for how long is not specified.[2]

Given that there are no time limits on the "title", it is not surprising that children exclaimed "It's mine" when using a piece of school property. Yet it is also clear, from the different ways that they attempted to gain access to school property as opposed to private property that they knew it was not theirs.[3] In these situations "It's mine" meant "I'm using it and as the user I have certain rights over it."[4] Similar statement by the teachers carried the same meaning.

The children were washing the school's rubber animals. Each child was given one animal to wash. They fought over access to the washtub and the animals.

Teacher: (Hearing them fighting) I hope you're all sharing.
Kathy Ann: Joy won't let me.
Children: (Yelling) Share it! Share it!
Teacher: That's Ronald's elephant. Let Ronald do it. Give Ronald a turn.

It would be misleading to suggest that their recognition of the rights of an individual holding private property and especially communal property always guided their actions. Children did not share willingly, even when instructed to do so by the teacher. As others have observed (cf Spiro 1958 and Zinser et al 1975) sharing or turn-taking usually had to be initiated and maintained by teachers.[5]

Kathy was coloring by herself at the table. The teacher brought Sarah over to the table.

Teacher: Kathy you have to share these crayons with her. O.K. So you can keep them here or you can take some.
Kathy: (Left the crayons in the center of the table)

Rachel, Jennifer and the teacher were coloring.

Rachel: (Reaches into the can for crayon)
Jennifer: No, Rachel.
Teacher: Rachel can have some crayons. You can share. She doesn't take very many.

While property especially school property was often critical to the play, interaction was often kept running smoothly through the manipulation of private property. When disputes occured over what game to play, children often tried bribing one another. Often these interchanges became quite complex with offers and counter offers. The child who offered access to private property usually won.

Melissa, Jennifer, Amy and Bre were playing together next to the rocking boat. Melissa wanted them to play "birthday". Amy wanted them to play "picnic".

Melissa: O.K., pretend, pretend all of you were going to come to my birthday.
Amy: No, picnic.
Melissa: Then I won't be your friend.
Amy: Do you want to see my cat?
Melissa: Yeh.
Amy: Well do you want to see my cat?
Melissa: Yeh.
Amy: Well, if you want to see my cat, well if you want to see my cat then you have to go on the picnic.
Melissa: O.K. Let's go on the picnic.
(Children step into rocking boat announcing: We're going on a picnic)

Talk about private property also drew others attention, often leading to sustained interaction.

A group of children were playing with dolls in a tub.

Robbie: (Walks over) I have a toy at my house.
Myra: You have a toy at your house.
Robbie: I have a record player.
Jenny: I have...(voice trails off).
Cal: I have a ...
John: (Interrupts) And I have a Mr. Potato Head...
Teacher: (Walks over) How are these babies coming?

To change the topic of conversation, children often started by talking about their possessions.

Curtis and Myra were discussing Myra's tape recorder.

Myra: You think I should get a new battery for it?
Curtis: So I got a new washing machine already. I got a washing machine already.
Myra: You do.
Curtis: I have two radios.
Myra: You have two radios.
Curtis: Mm hm. And when...and I used to have my red one was broken too.
Myra: Oh, you used to have two radios?
Curtis: Well my red one was broken too.
(Silence)

Christopher and Myra discussing who lives in his house.

Christopher: Father lives in my house.
Myra: O.K. Father and who else?
Christopher: And his car's dented. He has a new car now, a Maverick.
Myra: How did his car get dented?
Christopher: Somebody hit it with another car.
Myra: Is he O.K.?
Christopher: Yeah, he has some glass in his head.
Myra: Oh.
(Teacher walks over with magazine for Christopher to cut up and begins discussion)

Discussion of private property filled gaps in a conversation.

Bre, Amy and Cory were seated at a table pasting pieces of paper together, without comment.

Bre: I got candyland at my house.
Cory: I do (too).
Bre: Did you know I got candyland at my house?
Amy: No!
Bre: Do you want me to show it to you?
Amy: (Nods yes)
Bre: Some day you can come to my house and I'll show it to you.
Amy: (Continues pasting)
Bre: (Continues pasting)
Cory: (Leaves the table)

In brief, the children never used school property or handicrafts to gain anothers attention or to enter a conversation, no less change the topic of conversation or get other children to do their

bidding.[6]

The only time the mention of school property ever drew anyone's attention was when it was in the form of a tattle, and then the attention desired was not another child's, but the teachers.[7]

Mandy: (Walking up to the Teacher) Teacher, Rachel put toys in her lunch box.
Teacher: What?
Mandy: Rachel put toys in her lunch box.
Teacher: She put toys in her lunch box. Take the toys out, Rachel.

Private property also played an important role in the formal portion of the day, circle time. During circle time the children sang songs, listened to stories, learned how to count and recite the alphabet as well as the roles of various members of their community, and the interests and activities of their classmates.

Of the many topics they discussed, two which came up weekly, were trespassing and stealing. For example, at one circle time, after the teacher read the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears.

she explained that Goldilocks deserved to be punished because she had trespassed. She then went into a long discussion about not going onto other people's lawns or into their houses without being invited.

One day Robbie displayed a "Crazy Straw" that he had "taken from the supermarket without paying". This led to two half hour discussions on theft. By comparison, formal lessons on science and math lasted about fifteen minutes.

The only lessons that even came close in length to the lessons on theft were discussions about policemen and jail. Interestingly enough these too led to discussions of theft.

Teacher: Who goes to jail?
Ellen: Bad people.
Teacher: People who do things against the law, like people that steal.
Children: And robbers.
Teacher: And robbers, that's the same as stealing. If you're a robber you take something that does not belong to you. Then the police have to come and put you in jail.
Amy: (Calls out) In the night when you're sleeping too. It can be very scary when someone opens the door by theirself and comes in.
Jennifer: And steal something from you.
Teacher: Well I don't think too many people do that, not when you're home.

Justine: (During a discussion of policemen and emergencies) Emergency, 'cause Batman and Robin, they're the crime fighters 'cause of the bad guys.
Teacher: They are the crime fighters aren't they - Batman and Robin. Police are crime fighters.
Melissa: Guess what!
Teacher: What?
Melissa: If somebody steals your money then you have to call the police.
Amy: If somebody steals your pocketbook.
Teacher: Yeah, you have to call the police.
Children: (Call out with different reasons when you should call the police)

One circle time per week, was devoted to Show and Tell, when children displayed things which they had brought from home. The children knew the ritual well and looked forward to planning what they would bring in, often discussing it with their friends.

Jennifer, Melissa and Ronald were sitting around a table coloring, without comment.
Ronald: Know what I'm going to bring in tomorrow for show and tell?
Melissa: What?
Ronald: I'm going to bring in some play money.
Melissa: Money.
Jennifer: I'm going to bring in my big teddy bear.

The format remained virtually the same regardless of what the children said or displayed.[9] The teacher would call on a child, ask him to stand, if he had not done so when his name was called, and then ask him what he had brought. The child stated in as little as one word and no more than a sentence what the object was. The teacher would then ask one question, usually something about the article's color or condition. The child would answer the question, again with no more than a single sentence. The teacher would then make a comment about the object and direct the child to put it away - in the kitchen or the cubby holes.

Teacher: What did you bring Lionel? Stand up and show us what you brought.
Lionel: (Stands up) A car.
Teacher: A car - turn around this way so everyone can see. And what color is that car?
Lionel: Green car.
Teacher: Green and it's a very nice car. Very nice. Put it in the kitchen.

When I discussed my observations about the format of show and tell with the teacher, she agreed and asked if I noticed that a child never showed the same thing two weeks in a row; she added that they also never showed school property or items which they had made in school.

Show and Tell was unique among all the events of the week in that it was the one time during the entire week when a child could command the undivided attention of the group. In this, I believe lay its social importance. The importance of giving attention to those speaking at show and tell was reinforced by the fact that it was one time during which those who misbehaved were consistently censured or punished.

After a rather noisy show and tell session five children remained seated in the circle. The others had been dismissed for snack.

Teacher: Now look who's left and why are we waiting.

Jenny: We were all bad.

Teacher: You were not sitting quietly on the line. You were playing with each other, you were chattering while the other children were trying to have their show and tell. Next time will you try to zipper your lips while other people are talking.

Children: Yes.

Teacher: O.K. Everybody go get your snack.

When it comes to property then, the resemblance between adults and children in this society is striking. 'What's mine is mine. You can try to take it from me but if I don't want to give it to you I don't have to. Society will even back me up. Stealing is a violation of society's rules punishable by imprisonment. I can do whatever I want with what's mine. I can use it to get what I want from other people. I like you to know what I have, and I know you want to know what I have, after all you listen when I talk about my stuff. I respect your rights to your things. I ask before I take. Things I want that don't belong to you, that are there for everyone to use are a different matter. I have a right to use those things and will fight to get what I want. But when I'm using something, I want to use it. It's like it's mine then. Sharing does not come anymore naturally to me than it does to you. By the way, when was the last time you parted with something you really liked without expecting something, at least some recognition, in return?'

FOOTNOTES

[1]I should point out that such acts of generosity, like Sarah's here, were extremely rare. The few other acts of generosity I observed were between a child and a teacher not between children. The item offered was always a handicraft, an item of little value to other children. It also seemed that even in the giving there was an ulterior motive - attention.

Melissa: Look at my picture.
Myra: It's nice.
Melissa: I'm making it for you.
I'm putting my name on it
so you'll remember. (Spells
out as she writes) M-E-L-I-S-A

Similar observations were made by Zinser et al (1975) using projective techniques to access children's generosity.

[2]See also example on pp 3 .

[3]Spiro (1958:378) also found this to be the case amongst nursery school children living on Kibbutz in Israel.

[4]This notion is implicit in Bre and Amy's discussion, described above.

[5]See also example on pp 3 .

[6]Only one child even attempted to use school property in these endeavors and then only to gain another's attention. Interestingly enough, when she failed she p inted to another child's private property.

[7]Tattles involving property occured more frequently than any other tattle (Spiro 1958, Dawe 1934, Jersild and Markey 1935).

[8]These were the first words that Mandy, a five year old utter since she came to the nursery school, 3 months earlier.

[9]A fuller discussion of the format, deviations from it, and show and tell in general, is contained in the larger working paper from which this presentation is taken.

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